

# Trade union strategies for preventing workload and stress in the Netherlands

**Jan Warning**

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# May I introduce myself?

- FNV Bondgenoten, the biggest union in the Netherlands (460.000 members) in industry, the food sector, agriculture, transport and retail and the private services sector
- Head of health and safety department
- Dissertation on trade unions and stress

# My presentation

1. Labour relations in the Netherlands
2. Short theoretical description of stress
3. How the dutch unions succeeded in the years 1998 – 2003 putting stress at a number 1 priority on the social agenda
4. The Quick Scan Stress
5. Evaluation

# Working population in the Netherlands

2004

- agriculture 202
- industry 1503
- commercial services 2654
- non commercial services 2331

(x 1000)

# Quality of work in the Netherlands

- Penetration of computers, IT
- Flexibility
- High level of productivity

# Dutch labour relations

- Highly centralized
- Unions powerful on the national level and weak on the working floor
- Orientation on consensus
- 26% unionized

# Social questions

- In the 80's shortening working hours (40 -> 37 hours a week)
- Together with new technologies and flexibility this led to prosperity and employment in the 90's
- Problems of workload and stress
- Increase of (unofficial and unpaid) overtime

# Problems of stress and workload

- Workers working at high speed: highest increase in Europe (Dublin foundation)
- Disability claimants (1 million of claimants at the end of 20th century)
- 1/3 has psychological complaints
- Total costs: 2,2 bilions euro a year



# Theory about stress

- Stress = workers don't have enough time or exert strength to accomplish the tasks within the available time
- A situation of stress will leads to strain
- Reduced performance, irritations between colleagues, fatigue and security problems

# Consequences

- If a situation of stress and strain is structural, this can lead to severe health problems: burn out, a situation of mental exhaustion
- Control options can reduce these consequences
- Control: possibilities to intervene in the work situation

# What are the origins for stress?

Complicated and divers:

- poor leadership
- education
- planning and the work organisation
- temporary personnel
- insufficient tools
- continuous rationalisation of the working process

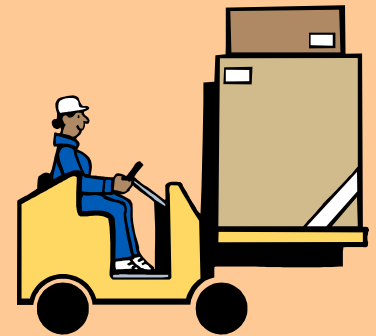
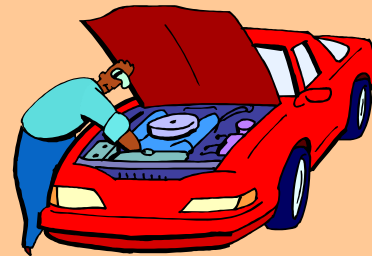
# Need for a trade union instrument

*I can't influence work path*

*I feel exhausted every evening*

*I have mental complaints*

*I don't take fancy in my job*



# Need for a trade union instrument (2)

*It is subjective*

*The problems are due to private circumstances*

*It is not measurable*

*It is only imagination*



# Union strategy

Unions have to tackle two arguments:

- problems are real and not imagination
- problems are originated in the work situation

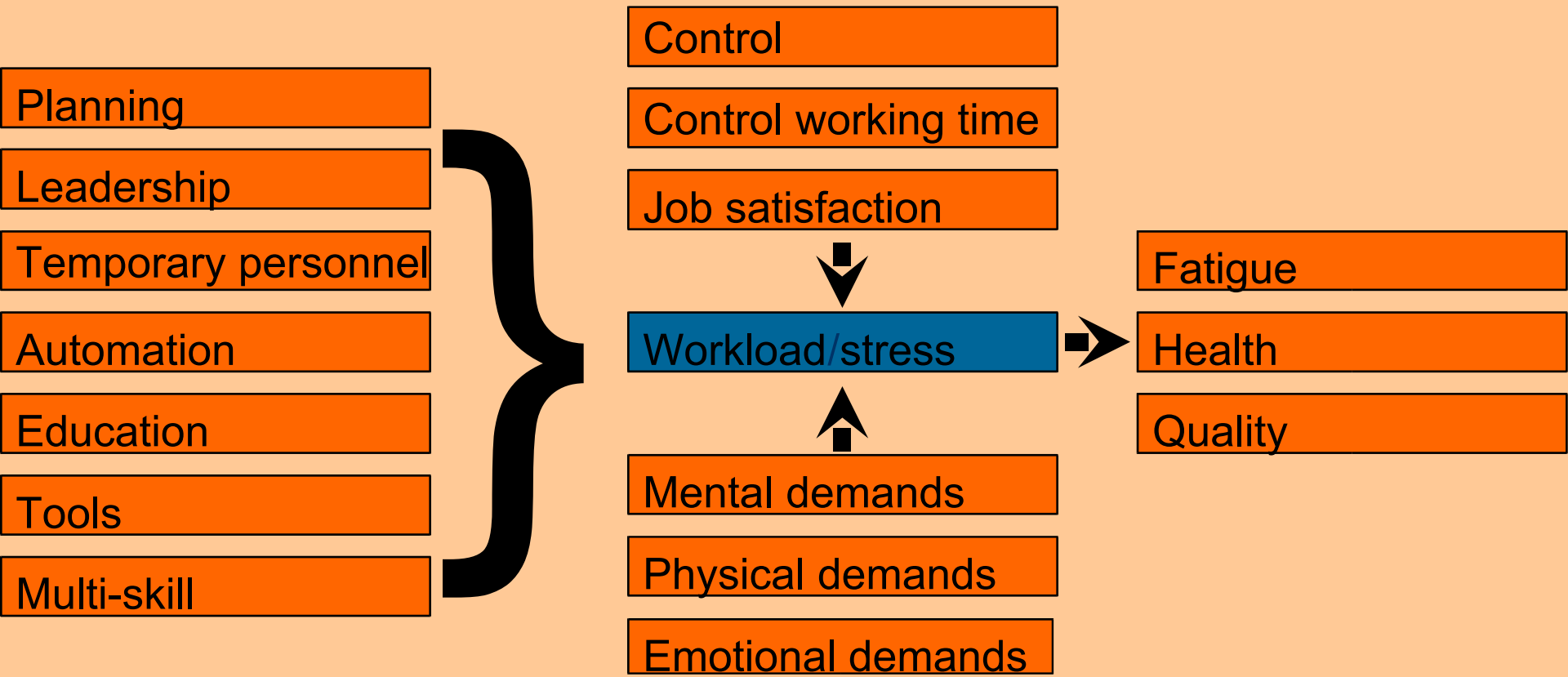
Invention of the *'Quick Scan Stress'*



# The Quick Scan Stress

- Research instrument for trade unionists and works councils
- Three steps:
  1. Questionnaire to be distributed among the workers
  2. The answers have to be filled in on the computer program
  3. A push on the button and the scientific report is ready
- Costs software and booklet: 60 euro

# The theoretical model

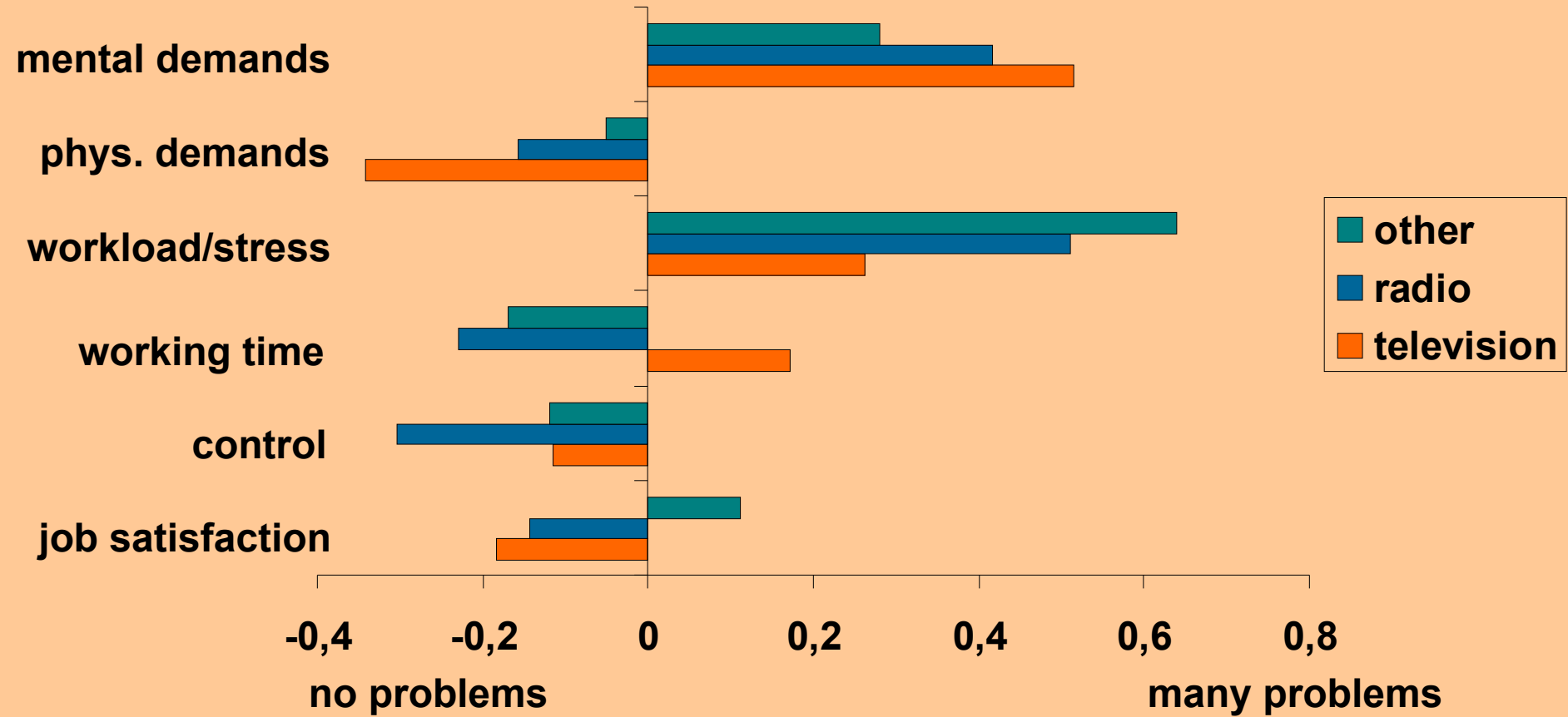




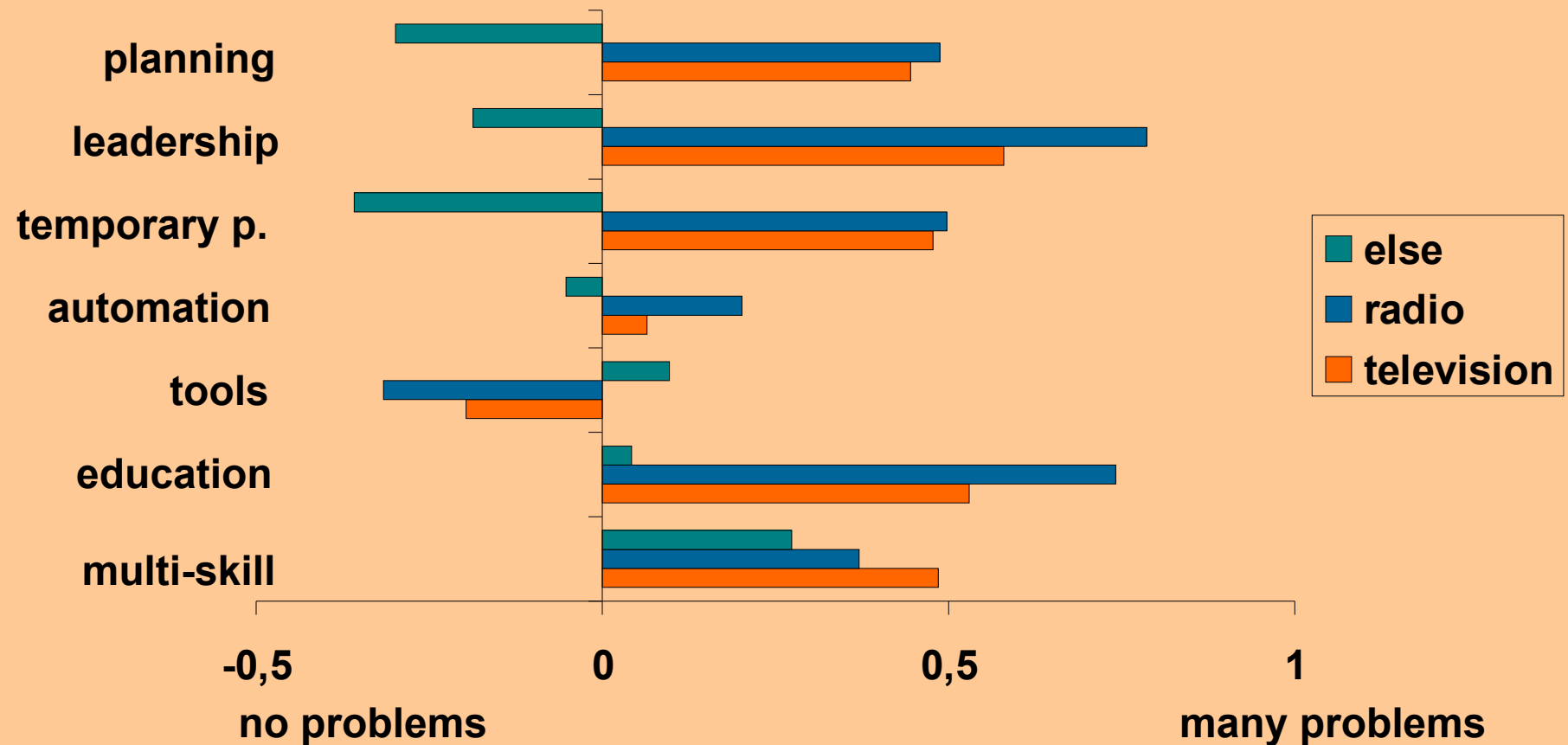
# The questionnaire

- 94 questions
- More questions on one subject
- Example scale *Control on work*
  - Do you have much to say in what happens in your workplace?
  - Can you determine the timing of your work activities?
  - Can you influence your job planning?
  - Do you have a say in decisions that have an impact on your job?
- Scale construction
- Compare with reference group

# Graphical presentation



# Origins of workload/stress



# Evaluation

- The Quick Scan Stress important to raise awareness
- Two important advantages:
  - *Easy*
  - *Scientifically based*
- It is easier to tackle the problem of stress in companies
- Many copies have been sold (also by employers)

# Evaluation (2)

- Amount of time
- A general impression
- After collecting information action is needed
- Implementation of measures

# Evaluation (3)

- The dutch experience consists of more than the Quick Scan Stress
- Other instruments, information on website
- Collective agreements

At the moment Dutch unions in a difficult debate about Working Environment Act and Working Times Act